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Embodied Knowing: An Experiential, Contextual, and Reflective Process

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Keywords: embodied knowledge, bodily knowing

Abstract: This study explored the process of embodied knowing in social workers. Analysis of data gathered through interviews with ten participants revealed embodied knowing to be a developmental process based on experience, context, and reflection.

Introduction and Purpose

The mind/body dualistic approach to learning has dominated the field of education since the Enlightenment creating an unrealistic separation of the mind from the body, while also promoting the mind over the body in the knowledge creating process (Simon, 1998). The field of adult education has begun to acknowledge there are non-cognitive ways of knowing such as connected and constructed knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986), tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1969), unconscious knowing (Dirkx, 2001), and embodied knowing (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Embodied knowing has been defined as not only knowledge that resides in the body, but also knowledge that is gained through the body (Nagatomo, 1992). Hanna (1980) described embodied knowing as a constant flow of senses and actions that occur within the experiences of each individual.

Social work is both a science and an art (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2006) in that both the science (mind) and the art (body) must work together to engage clients. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), through its accreditation standards, provides curriculum guidelines for schools of social work on the science aspect and social work has traditionally relied on the cognitive, scientific, and rational modalities as primary ways of knowing. However, there is little specified in these guidelines to address the art component which Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2004) described as the intuitiveness in practice. In recent years, there has been increasing acknowledgement of other ways of knowing to include: emotional (Peile, 1998), spiritual (Gallant, Holosko & Gallant, (2005); intuition (Myers, 2002) , and embodied knowledge (Shaw, 2004).

It is fitting to explore the concept of embodied knowing in social work practice under the umbrella of adult education as adult education researchers provide learning theories that offer a foundation for understanding how adults learn beyond the traditional classroom setting. Adult education recognizes the importance of experience, context and reflection for further learning. Social workers are adults, working in a wide variety of practice settings, learning through their experiences. As discussed, most of the research has focused on the cognitive level, with a plethora of research on experiential learning and situated cognition as valid avenues of where and how adults best learn (Dewey, 1938; Fenwick 2000). As social work practitioners actively engage in real life experiences in their interactions with clients, they are experientially learning in a specific context. The best social work practitioners are those who practice holistically with the ability to recognize and incorporate bodily reactions into their practice. Although the profession has begun to explore the integration of body and mind in both social work practice with clients and for social worker self-awareness (Peile, 1998; Shaw, 2004), there is no research on how embodied knowing is manifested, reflected upon, and specifically integrated in social

work practice. Therefore the primary **purpose** of this study was to understand how social workers developed and experienced embodied knowing.

Understanding how social workers develop and experience embodied knowing adds to the adult education literature in several ways. First this research will add to adult learning theory by showing how embodied knowing is linked to past experience and that context plays a significant role in how it is manifested. Second, this study validates the body as a site of knowing and opens the door for adult educators to provide a safe space for adult learners to actively incorporate the role of their bodies in their knowledge base. Third, the findings from this study also provide more insight in the areas of experiential learning and build on the reflective practice literature. Fourth, the results of this research provide evidence that social work practitioners actively engage their bodies in both their decision-making process, and in relating empathically with clients. Finally, both social workers and adult educators will be encouraged to discuss embodied knowing experiences and recognize the significance of bodily knowledge as credible and that all ways of knowing should be equally validated.

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this study, embodied knowing is conceptualized within two theoretical frameworks: experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and situated cognition (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). Michelson (1996) argued that experiential learning in adult education is one of the most important areas of scholarship, focusing on personal knowledge and lived experience. However, in the vast scholarship on experiential learning, the body has been neglected (Fenwick, 2003). Kolb (1984), considered a pioneer in experiential learning, separated the concrete experience from reflection, assuming that thinking and doing are separate. Kolb's model has been applied in much of the adult education research, but as Fenwick (2003) noted, "the aching dribbling body, the longing passionate body, child-tied and labour-marked, rooted in history and responsibility" (p. 125), has been absent in the research. Some proponents of embodied knowing, especially feminist thinkers, regard the body as a site of knowledge and experience; the experience itself being located in the body (Grosz, 1993; Michelson, 1998). Experience is not only considered to be the foundation for embodied knowing, but experience and the subsequent emotions are also thought to be bodily events (Matthews, 1998; Michelson, 1998).

Caffarella and Merriam (2000) described the contextual perspective to learning as one where learning cannot be separated from the context where it takes place. If embodied knowing is defined as a contextual experience that occurs through interactions with the environment, theories such as situated cognition and experiential learning (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000) could be an avenue for educators to facilitate embodied knowing as a way of learning. This type of learning incorporates the learning activity with culture and context, where learners' experiences and the tools used in those experiences are a major component of the learning process (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). In embodied knowing, the body itself is both the site of learning and a vehicle for learning (Matthews, 1998; Michelson, 1998); as such the body could be considered the tool that the learner uses to facilitate the learning process.

Research Design and Methodology

This study was a general qualitative study to explore the phenomena of embodied knowing in social work practitioners. This study was well suited for qualitative research methods as it sought to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences and the outcome was highly descriptive in nature (Merriam, 2001). The purposeful sample of ten social work

practitioners had: a) a Masters of Social Work degree; b) been practicing for a minimum of five years, c) were between 36 and 63 years old, and d) represented a variety of practice settings. The primary means of data collection method used was semi structured interviews focused on how social workers developed and experienced embodied knowing. Audio recorded sixty minute interviews were later transcribed. Additionally, participants' body language during the interview was recorded. These data were analyzed using constant comparative techniques, and member checks were conducted to enhance the dependability (Merriam, 2001). Additional sources of data were photographs taken of the participants' work environments which provided insight into how the physical environment reflected their holistic approach to their practices.

Findings

The findings of this study revealed that embodied knowledge is a contextual, experiential, and reflective process based on a combination of the internalized feelings created from (a) the social workers' past life experiences, (b) the internal reactions that are triggered within each context of the social work interaction, and (c) the processing of those internal reactions. The result of these three factors is embodied knowing and it is here that the social worker becomes more aware of his/her body and develops trust in it as a source of knowledge. This embodied knowing is holistically integrated into the social worker and as such is knowledge that is carried into future life experiences and social work interactions.

Compilation of Life Experiences

Participants described childhood, adulthood, as well as cultural experiences that became internalized as bodily memories which impacted their practices. In childhood, for Tee, she recalled "feeling safe" when there was turbulence at home by hiding in the woods. Her practice today is in a cabin in a serene, wooded setting. Mary described becoming "hypervigilant" and related it to a "sensory radar" that she now "listens to" in her interactions with clients. Adulthood experiences for Pete, as he faced his addiction, and Carol, as she battled depression, pushed them to get in touch with the physical sensations in their bodies associated with deeper emotions. Three African American participants shared how being Black in the South made them more aware and in tune with their physical reactions, whether it be a "cold, sinking feeling in my gut" (Melissa), a "tense, rigidity in my body" (Dee), or "the sensations in my gut" (Ken).

Internal Reactions

Participants described immediate somatic internal reactions during social work interactions. These physical reactions included: "muscular tension, headaches, tingling, and changes in breathing patterns." Participants connected physical sensations with feelings. For example, the stomach was an area of somatic manifestation for every participant but connected to different feelings. For Dee and Nina, a reaction in the stomach was related to anger. Ken's stomach translated into a "sense of nervousness." Melissa described an overwhelming sadness that manifested in her stomach, "I could feel you know, just the tightening in my stomach listening to some of these stories." Universally, physical fatigue was also manifested internally as Mary described, "I am physically more tired at the end of the session; and remain tenser for longer; my body takes longer to relax." Participants often found it challenging to separate their somatic, cognitive, and affective reactions as they seemed to occur almost simultaneously: Nina summed up this struggle: "It's just that I think the mind is not discrete from the body; the body isn't discrete from the emotions. They're all sort of interconnected and intertwined."

Processing Internal Reactions

Participants processed these sensations by (a) becoming aware of somatic sensations and (b) engaging in reflective practice. Mary described how she constantly worked to stay aware: “It involves being tuned into your internal cues, and also aware of external bodily cues.” Pete also stated that he constantly worked to stay aware, and as a result felt, “My awareness of it [his bodily reactions], I think is improving. I’m more in tune I think, as I practice with what we’re calling mind body knowledge.” Participants described instances of reflection occurring both while actually in the midst of the social work interaction, and also after the interaction when they experienced somatic sensations. For instance, some participants became aware of a somatic change while in a session with a client. Pete noted, “I’m aware of the breathing and it’s more rapid, it’s not obvious hyperventilating however,” which his past experiences have linked with the feeling of anxiety. However, he continued, “I don’t have time to sort it all out now, but note to self, as soon as this encounter’s over go somewhere, real quick and take stock and look and see what’s there.” Some more experienced practitioners were able to actually reflect-in-action (Schon, 1983). For example, Carol expressed how, when in session, her body signaled her. She described the process: “Sometimes, you know I feel funny I have to stop, well I don’t stop, I have to kind of stop myself, and think what’s going on here, what’s going on with me why am I feeling like this. I check in.”

Embracing Embodied Knowing

A compilation of the above three factors resulted in social workers embracing embodied knowing by recognizing their bodies as a source of knowledge and by trusting their somatic sensations. Participants described embodied knowing as “gut knowledge,” “intuitive knowledge,” “practice wisdom,” “a physical knowledge,” and a “source of knowledge.” Pete’s expanded definition encompassed the thoughts of most participants as he shared, “The word embodied has a connotation or a meaning more involved with knowledge that is transmitted to me by various parts of my body, what my body’s telling me...an almost, un or sub conscious, sort of knowledge that’s innate to me, that I’m not consciously aware of having learned, or where I got it from.” Participants were adamant in their beliefs that social workers needed to first accept that there are different ways of knowing and then to trust the body as a valid source of knowledge. Tee stated that trust comes with “doing it” and Mary asserted that “having the confidence to trust, and getting it right a few times” helps build the belief in embodied knowing. The premise that trust came with using the body was echoed by Tee, Pete, Carol and Melissa who all said, “Trust It!” [the body].

Discussion and Implications

This study found that embodied knowing for these participants is an experiential, contextual, reflective learning process. Participants’ early experiences become embedded in their bodies as knowledge, which enabled them to engage with clients at a deeper, bodily level. Participants described their pre-social work experiences, in childhood, adulthood, and also culturally, that they were able to connect to their somatic reactions in specific social work practice situations. Although they had learned about social work theory and practice in the classroom, it was in their internships and early years of practice where participants felt their embodied learning really began. In regards to embodied learning, it was being exposed to different experiences that triggered somatic reactions, which initiated the exploration of their bodies as sources of knowledge.

The findings from this study, although still identifying reflection as a component, also recognize and validate embodied knowledge, which was triggered by the participants' experiences. In fact, participants support Michelson's (1996) contention that experiences, reflection, and knowledge occur simultaneously, and that it is a dynamic process. The experience itself became embodied, and this provides empirical evidence for Fenwick's (2000) contention that experiential learning occurs "within action, within and among bodies" (p. 127). Matthews (1998) recognized that embodied learning is contextual. Context was integral to the participants' somatic reactions which were triggered by a variety of different situations including the type of client with whom they worked, the setting they were in, and the role they were serving.

Brookfield (1988) discussed critical reflection as a cognitive way of meaning making and decision making. The findings from this study deviate from this definition of critical reflection in that when participants engaged their embodied knowing they described it as 'sitting' with the feeling, bodily, not cognitively. While in session, they did not use critical reflection to process this non-cognitive way of knowing. In fact, all the social work practitioners in this study believed their bodies invaluable in their practices, providing feedback on which to reflect. They shared examples of how, when they, in fact, ignored their bodies, they found they did not make the best decisions, and even may have caused harm to the clients.

This study has significant implications for both adult education theory and practice. First, the results of this study provide empirical evidence to theoretical discussions of embodied knowing and impetus to recognize embodied learning a credible avenue for knowledge production. Second, this study challenges adult education theorists and researchers to broaden traditional learning theories such as experiential learning, reflective practice, and situated cognition to incorporate the body.

Adult education practitioners can do much to increase awareness of embodied knowing through their work as educators whether in continuing education, program planning, workplace trainings etc. Embodied knowing needs to be integrated into how we practice, and we need to continue to be aware that educational experiences can be explored through the body. The body needs to be recognized as a viable source of knowledge and be more visible in society. As adult educators we have the obligation to acknowledge embodied knowing and to encourage those with whom we teach and practice to tap into their own bodies, and then share this knowledge with others.

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